

# *Feminist geography in the UK: the dialectics of women-gender-feminism-intersectionality and praxis*

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## **Feminist geography in the UK: the dialectics of women-gender-feminism-intersectionality and praxis**

*'Feminist political theory draws on particular spatial imaginations in elaborating a politics of transformation'* (Robinson 2000: 285)

### **Introduction**

Feminist praxis has always been about both the individual and the collective; one of the revolutionary and utopian promises of feminism is that of being, bringing, and working *together*. This piece provides a brief account of some of the scholarship and collective activities within British feminist geography over the last twenty five years; it is inevitably selective and partial, shaped in part by our experiences and perspectives, one of us having joined the ranks of feminist geography as a doctoral student in the early 1990s when the modes and themes of feminist theory and praxis on offer were presented as closely defined camps (e.g. socialist, radical and post-structural), the other as a doctoral student twenty years later by which time more modes of feminism and feminist geographies had emerged. For many of us involved, Feminist Geography in the UK over the last 25 years or so has been an exciting, dynamic and sometimes challenging community, body of scholarship and catalyst for change. That impetus for change has included research highlighting gendered epistemologies, socio-economic, cultural and political spaces and networks, inequalities and other social justice issues within the UK and internationally, which in turn has informed changing understanding, local and national government policies and practices.

### **Some key publications and research themes**

This piece does not allow for a thorough review of British research in feminist geography, but we would like to highlight some core publications (some of which predate the publication of *Gender, Place and Culture*) and some important developments and trends over the years. Reflecting the politics of dynamic feminist issues, methodologies and epistemologies, these include what may now be seen as foundational work within feminist geography, on topics such as women's gendered lives in the Global South (Momsen and Townsend 1987, Radcliffe 2014; Laurie and Baillie Smith 2018), gender, Empire and post-colonialism (e.g. Blunt 1994; Blunt and Rose 1994); fieldwork (Rose 1993; Bracken and Mawdsley 2004); Lesbian geographies (Valentine 1993, 2003); gendered experience of crime (Pain 2000; Brickell 2015); and gender and employment (McDowell 2002, 2003). Key collective publications have also played a pivotal role in grounding feminist geographical work in the UK, such as *Gender and Geography* (WGSF 1984) (see section on collective work below). Key developments in the 2000s include work on notions of home (e.g. Blunt 2005) and a growing emphasis on women and gender within migration studies and other policy-oriented geographies (e.g. Kothari 2013; Kofman and Raghuram 2015; Crawley 2016); political geographies of post-colonialism and postcolonial scholarship (e.g. Sharp 2009; Noxolo 2017a); a rich body of work on emotional geographies (including Liz Bondi's pivotal contributions (Bondi et al 2005), and studies such as Boyer et al (2012) on commoditised childcare and emotional labour; Stevenson, Parr and Woolnough (2017) on the missing); inequalities within service industries (e.g. Batnitzky and McDowell 2011); embodiment and embodied geographies (e.g. Colls (2010, 2011; Rioux 2015); children's geographies (e.g. Ansell et al 2014); sexualities (e.g. Browne and Nash 2017; Wilkinson 2009); participatory geographies (e.g. Pain and Kindon 2007) and geographies of religion (e.g. Dwyer and Shah 2011; Hopkins, Botterill,

Sanghera and Arshad 2017). And so much more. The role of pivotal volumes and the advent of a feminist geography international peer review journal in the form of *Gender, Place and Culture* cannot be underestimated in providing a dedicated international outlet for peer-reviewed feminist geography scholarship in the UK and beyond. British geography's historic institutions have also validated geographical research prioritizing gender through their award of prestigious medals; those honoured by the Royal Geographical Society with IBG include: Linda McDowell, Uma Kothari, Gill Valentine, Jo Sharp, Parvati Raghuram, Peter Hopkins, Alison Blunt, Katherine Brickell, Harriet Hawkins, Janet Townsend, Janet Momsen, Katie Willis and Rachel Pain (RGS-IBG 2018).

Interestingly, a significant and growing body of work by feminists doesn't necessarily include the 'F' word, at least not in publication titles or keywords. There can be varied reasons for this, including fear of prejudice, however, whilst mainstreaming feminist theory, research methods and broader praxis represents a considerable discursive shift – achievement even – there is an evident risk that considerations of gender could become so well-integrated, so normalised that they are made invisible, then become neglected, and in turn slip off the agenda altogether despite ongoing gendered inequalities. As Browne (2009) noted, negotiations of gendered spaces and strategies are often contested, including negotiating paradoxes and juxtapositions, an observation which applies equally to communities as well as scholarship.

### **Collective work, network and space**

Moving from publications to communities, when reflecting upon the trajectories of feminist geography in the UK over the last few decades, one cannot proceed very far without considering the central role played by a key UK collective: the Gender and Feminist Geographies Research Group (GFGRG) (formerly the Women and Geography Study Group (WGSG)), one of 31 current Research and Working Groups active under the umbrella of the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) (RGS-IBG)). Here, we seek to use the GFGRG and its work as a lens through which we can view the wider story of feminist geography in the UK. We write this short reflection as feminist geographers who have both been active within the GFGRG and its networks, while acknowledging the work of the group's founders and current leadership, and the feminist work done beyond GFGRG and these particular institutional spaces.

From its early beginnings in the late 1970s – the WGSG formally became a study group of the IBG in 1982 (Wyse, 2013) and renamed as the GFGRG in 2013 (see commentary on this below) – the WGSG/GFGRG has served to anchor, foster and promote the growth and development of feminist geography in the UK, setting intellectual, political and advocacy agendas around the nexus of women-gender-geography. In this focus on praxis, it has shared overlapping agenda and approaches with other cognate research collectives focusing on inequalities and social justice, including the Space, Sexualities and Queer Research Group (SSQRG) and the more recently founded Race, Culture and Equality Working Group (RACE) (to which we also return below).

That dual focus and purpose – providing both intellectual heft and professional-political solidarity and advocacy, with both aims inevitably deeply intertwined – has been at the heart of the group since the outset and can be seen clearly in its founding statement (Wyse, 2013). One primary aim has been to promote the study and consideration of gender and/in geography, evidenced materially through its series of publications: *Gender and Geography* (1984), *Feminist Geographies: explorations in diversity and difference* (1997), *Geography and Gender Revisited* (2004), and the forthcoming *Feminist Reader*. It can also be seen in the sessions the group sponsors at the RGS-IBG annual international conference. The continued life and dynamism of feminist research in geography is

exemplified by the group's 'new and emerging' sessions at the annual conference, where early career scholars are invited to present their work in a supportive environment. The topics covered are diverse – ranging across domestic violence, migration, sex work, and care, to name but few, as are the sub-disciplines included – e.g. urban geography, rural geography, cultural geography, geographies of justice. These sessions have been welcomed by many participants as providing a platform and constructive environment for both emerging feminist scholarship and scholars, as well as an opportunity to meet others and network.

Networking represents another primary aim of the GFGRG has been to support women within geography, working as a network and collective, through both physical and virtual spaces. These have included reading weekends, mentoring 'cafes', career development workshops, and a mailing-discussion list). More formal work includes responding to consultations and lobbying for equality within the discipline (e.g. lobbying for gender equality in the UK government's system for evaluating academic research (Research Excellence Framework (REF))).

The group and those active in and around it, have also contributed to the project of mapping women within the profession of UK university geography, the issues they particularly face, and making these issues visible within the discipline. Long before the current 'Athena SWAN' gender equality scheme promoted such considerations to UK universities, two surveys in 1978 and 1988 mapped out the number of women in geography – particularly their low levels of representation in senior roles (McDowell 1979, McDowell and Peake 1990). This work was built on by a research project undertaken by a working party of the group in 2010, which coupled employment statistics with an extensive online survey exploring gendered career experience of both women and men in UK Geography. This data identified growth in the proportion of women in senior posts, but also the precarity experienced by early career academics in an increasingly marketised neo-liberal university sector; furthermore, it highlighted a range of explicit and implicit discriminatory practices, and the challenges faced by many of those juggling work, career, parental and other caring responsibilities; these challenges were particularly common for, but not limited to, female scholars (Maddrell et al 2016).

In 2013 the GFGRG also marked the centenary of the (belated) permanent admission of women to the Fellowship of the Royal Geographical Society in 1913. In the absence of any institutional event, a GFGRG working group (including the authors) devised a series of interventions at the RGS-IBG annual international conference under the strapline of '100+' as a political statement of the continuity of women's geographical work before and since 1913, as well as celebrating a diverse range of ongoing work in feminist Geography. Activities included: an international plenary panel on gendered violence (see commentaries in *Dialogues in Human Geography* (e.g. Datta 2016; Brickell 2016)); a dedicated themed strand in the conference programme; badges featuring influential female geographers; and a pop-up postcard display in which delegates and visitors were encouraged to write down the name of a woman who had inspired them – and *why* (a list which ranged from leading feminist scholars to the acknowledgement and celebration of more everyday influencers such as fellow students, tutors, school teachers and family members). A set of photo portraits of 'female firsts' for the RGS-IBG (medal holders, journal editors and other figureheads in the discipline) were also commissioned for the RGS-IBG building in South Kensington, addressing a visual absence (see WGSF 1997) and serving to materialise women's historical and contemporary leadership within the institution and collective memory of the Society, and British geography more widely.

However, whilst celebrating these various strands of flourishing feminist scholarship, supportive networks and lobbying-activism within and beyond the profession, there is still much work to be done and room for further growth, with feminist geography remaining a dynamic and evolving community and space for discussion, divergence and sometimes dispute. The decision about whether to change the group's name and potential implications this might have for the nature of the group and of UK feminist geography more widely, was fiercely debated. These pieces reflect ongoing and wider discussions about the nature of Feminism, inclusive/exclusive gendered discourses and praxis. The details of the discussions are not rehearsed here but were captured in an *Area* special section in 2013 (see Brickell et al 2013; Browne et al 2013; Brickell and Browne 2013; Evans et al 2013; Hopkins and Jackson 2013; Wyse 2013). Clearly, the group is 'not a single interest group, but an invaluable space of shifting, sometimes contested, pluralities' (Evans et al 2013) – even if change and contestation can be painful and those pluralities could be further diversified.

### **Future Trajectories**

Both in relation to and independent of the GFGRG, UK feminist research has flourished in recent years, not least as part of wider international and intersectional feminist thought and practice within and beyond geography. Today feminist geography in the UK continues as a lively and dynamic assemblage of interests and communities, its collective 'face' shaped by shifting constellations of emerging scholarship, publications, conferences and workshops. Collectively, Feminist geographers working in the UK, as elsewhere, continue to reveal the links between intersectional gender and wider structural inequalities, and negotiate the dialectical tensions of specific local and international gender inequalities (such as access to food and healthcare, refugee quotas and care, the gender pay gap, domestic violence, online trolling), while championing innovative geographical studies of gendered spaces and practices (such as those associated with children's geographies, the home and body). The acquisition and retention of wide-ranging gendered rights continue to be national and international socio-political issues (e.g. access to housing and healthcare, and post-Brexit workers' rights), as does the gendering of secure employment and promoted posts within British geography as a profession. Consideration of gender as a key structuring principle and power relation within societies and within academia is necessary to address both, likewise *all* forms of gender-based marginalisation and inequalities.

Furthermore, intersectional inequalities remain of paramount importance within wider society and within the discipline of geography and these are inherently feminist concerns. As highlighted by the recent work of the RGS-IBG RACE working group and others, particularly in the debates around the unforeseen problematics of the 2017 RGS-IBG annual conference chair's theme: 'Decolonising geographical knowledges' (see Esson et al 2017, Radcliffe 2017, and Noxolo 2017b, among others), UK geography remains a disproportionately white, and white-centric, discipline (Tolia-Kelly 2017), with BME colleagues strikingly and chronically underrepresented at all levels (Desai 2017). Despite reflecting intersectional feminist concerns, these wider trends have been reflected within a predominantly white UK feminist geography network. Feminist geographers continue to work to find creative ways to work for intersectional interests and agenda, including supporting and undertaking anti-racist and decolonial work within and beyond geography.

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